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We used to call this phase of a campaign year "the silly season." But "silly" is too mild a word to describe some of the reckless and dangerous flim-flam being tossed around this year.

I have especially in mind the subtle and the not-so-subtle attempts to undermine the conservation ethic and the environmental cause.

These efforts, it seems to me, generally fall into three categories.

The first is ridicule, the heavy-handed attempt to portray conservationists and environmentalists as a flaky gaggle of folks who stalk the pileated woodpecker with binoculars and limit their social concerns to the plight of the whooping crane or the snail darter or the furbish lousewort. This insults all conservation-minded citizens who happen to be birdwatchers as well as those who aren't.

The second is the self-serving use of suspect facts and figures. You know what I mean. You've heard claims that: There's more oil in Alaska than there is in Saudi Arabia; there are more whitetail deer in America today than there were in George Washington's day (I wonder who took a head count back then); and that 80 percent of the air pollution comes from plants and trees.

The third approach, if not more responsible, is doubtless more effective.

As the New York Times put it on the tenth anniversary of Earth Day this spring: "Environmentalism is butting against economic constraints...The movement is colliding with problems that seem more urgent...Energy, inflation and recession have become the main political concerns and the efforts to reduce pollution or strip-mine damage are seen, often unfairly, as interfering with the nation's welfare."

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Remarks prepared for delivery by Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland at a joint meeting of the Iowa Association of Conservation District Commissioners and the Iowa Association of Farmer Elected Committeemen, August 18, 1980, Des Moines, Iowa

The most recent polls--including the extensive Lou Harris public opinion survey done for USDA as part of the RCA planning--show a strong majority of Americans are still solidly behind government efforts to clean up the environment and conserve resources. Nevertheless, the argument that a conservation ethic dictates a "no-growth" economic policy and that protecting the environment means fewer jobs, lower incomes, smaller profits and higher taxes is making inroads.

Yet no matter how sincere their concerns are about cost benefits, what those who are undercutting conservation and environmentalism seem to be telling the American people is this: "Let's exploit what we have today and worry about tomorrow tomorrow."

That is as ironic as it is dangerous.

The irony lies in the fact that so many of our economic problems of today came about precisely because years ago we didn't worry about tomorrow.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that concern for our natural resources at long last is firmly planted in the national conscience and that alone is worth cheering for today and building on tomorrow.

And now it's time for me to say a few words about the Administration's commitment to protecting the environment and conserving precious natural resources.

I approach this with some hesitance. Not because there isn't impressive evidence of the strength of that commitment, but because I don't like reciting laundry lists of accomplishments any more than audiences like listening to them.

So I'll be as brief and as sparing of statistics as I can.

As to the administration's record on the environment, let me simply quote from an article by William Atwood in last week's New Republic:

"(Carter) has shown more concern for the environment," Atwood writes, "than any president since Theodore Roosevelt: he already has preserved more than 100 million acres of Alaskan wilderness, pushed strip-mining legislation through Congress, and implemented the Clean Air and Water Acts."

As to conservation, again I'll be brief because, as someone noted, conservation speeches tend to be either filled with platitudes or to be so specific that listeners' eyes glaze over and their jaws drop into their soup.

So I'm going to skip over the USDA's role in the establishment of the rural abandoned mine program, the completion of the extensive National Resources Inventory, the launching of the Rural Clean Water Program, and the National Agricultural Lands Study, and many other conservation initiatives.

Instead I'm going to concentrate my report on the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act and the RCA process, because I know of your particular interest in this program.

As you may recall, the Congress passed the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA) during the previous administration. But that administration vetoed the bill.

The Congress later resurrected the RCA bill, made it even better, and passed it again. The present administration proudly signed the act into law, Public Law 96-192, on November 18, 1977. We then began the task of appraising the soil, water, and related resources of this Nation.

Preliminary indications are that we are on a soil and water resource degradation course. We are mining our resources and our resource losses have been masked by technology. We cannot sustain our production, and meet our need for food fiber and exports in the next 50 years, if we don't redirect our efforts.

What will happen as our own population grows and much of the rest of the world looks to us as its breadbasket? Will we have enough land to grow our crops, graze our livestock and raise our trees? Are we in danger of seeing our productive capacity erode along with the soil? Are we cutting more trees than we are growing? How much good farm and forest land will be lost to urbanization and highway construction? Can we afford to lose more wetlands, more fish and wildlife habitat?

These are some of the basic questions we have been considering through the RCA planning processes.

Now you'll want to know the status of the RCA effort.

First, the public response to our draft RCA documents was most significant. We received almost 65,000 responses from 118,000 people, and we analyzed each response to get a true picture of the public's desires and concerns about how future soil and water conservation programs should be designed.

Right now we're developing specific alternative soil and water conservation programs based on our appraisal of the resources and in consideration of what the public said.

In the draft RCA documents which the public reviewed in early 1980, we described a number of strategies which could be included in the design of a program.

Since a specific program was not included for review and comment, we decided to develop two or three alternative programs and again ask the public to comment. In this submission, we will indicate the program we prefer.

We plan to complete these programs and submit them for public consideration within the next few months.

And now in closing I'd like to say a few words about farm policy, because the stewardship of our resources--natural and human--has a direct bearing on how successful our food and agriculture system will be in the years to come.

Over the past 40 years, virtually every kind of farm program has been tried: rigid price supports tied to the parity concept, ever-normal granary, acreage allotment, soil banks, government storage programs wherein the Commodity Credit Corporation became the real market for farm products, domestic food programs aimed at reducing surpluses instead of feeding the hungry and improving nutrition, international food aid plans that amounted to little more than global charity programs. In the years from 1973 to 1976, we even saw a turn toward laissez faire agriculture.

All of these programs may have been well-intentioned. But they were all less than adequate.

I happen to think the approach followed in the 1977 Food and Agriculture Act is the most balanced of all approaches tried up to now. It provides reasonable price assurances and stability through target prices and the farmer-owned grain reserve, while it minimizes the extent and the cost of government involvement. At the same time, it has raised food standards at home through a reformed food stamp program while expanding aid and trade programs abroad.

The value and the effectiveness of the farmer-owned grain reserve is particularly evident today.

Right now Iowa farmers, for example, have some 300 million bushels of corn in that reserve program. About half of that is from the 1977 and 1978 harvests and the other half from last year's.

That corn is now available to be sold at a better price than it would have sold for a year ago and at a far better price than it would have claimed at this time in 1977.

The average price received by farmers for corn this July was \$2.73 a bushel. A year ago it was \$2.64. In July of 1977--reflecting the overproduction of the last year of laissez faire, "fence row to fence row" planting--the price was only \$1.88 a bushel.

Now I'm not going to try to tell you the higher prices of this July came about because this administration somehow set those prices. But I am going to tell you that Iowa corn farmers are going to benefit from those higher prices because they used the grain reserve that this administration made the centerpiece of its farm policy.

I will add this, however. Though the drought is in large part responsible for the higher prices, actions taken by the administration to offset the impact of the Soviet grain sales suspension did play a part in stabilizing prices.

I call your attention to the fact that this administration is the first administration to take any action whatsoever to buffer farmers from the effects of a grain embargo. In truth, we removed from the market--by one means or another--more grain than was originally ticketed for sale to the Soviets. Today, corn, wheat and soybean prices are running above what they were before the grain sales suspension was initiated.

But effective as the 1977 Act has been we have these paradoxes: Net farm income rose substantially in the last two years, equalling the second highest mark in history in 1979. But so has farm debt. And soaring production costs are cutting into net income prospects this year. The value of farm assets stands at record levels, but farmers' need for ready cash has rarely been greater. Farm product exports continue to set new records. But snarls in the transportation network moving these products across and out of the country have become more frequent and more serious. Moreover, we all must worry about the capacity of our soil and water resources to meet the productivity demand made by export expansion without sustaining serious loss.

Clearly the time has come to think about farm policy in terms of these paradoxes and in terms of the problems and challenges in the years ahead.

In the next 50 years our population will grow to 300 million. That's 80 million more Americans than there are today, and they'll have more money to spend on food, on shelter and on necessities and luxuries. At the same time, food demand from abroad is certain to accelerate. If we can meet these demands, our farm product exports could surge from this year's expected record of \$39 billion to \$100 billion by the year 1990.

But...over the next 50 years, water consumption will increase by 60 percent, the demand for timber will more than double, the demand for range grazing will rise by 40 percent, prime farmland will be converted to urban uses at the current rate of 1 million acres a year, our current reserve of potential cropland--about 127 million acres--will be depleted. Moreover the rate of technological progress in agriculture--which spurred earlier increases in productivity--already shows signs of slowing down.

American agriculture is petroleum based, and we already know that our proven reserves of oil have declined more than 25 percent since 1970 and that prices have soared out of sight.

Meanwhile, we are still losing more than 4 billion tons of topsoil every year, a loss that threatens the continued productivity of both agriculture and forestry. This past June alone, for example, 4,292,800 acres of Iowa land lost more than ten tons of topsoil per acre, the highest loss since 1974.

All of these considerations--plus evidence that modern farm policy has often been counterproductive to its stated goals, inequitable in that it often serves to help most those who need help least, and is more reactive than anticipatory--led me to call for what has come to be known as the Structure of Agriculture project.

My judgment was that the totality of change taking place and anticipated in the years immediately ahead required no less than a revolution in thinking about agriculture. It seemed to me that the time had come to abandon old slogans, re-examine old assumptions, develop new knowledge about what makes American agriculture tick and what direction it is heading, and use everything we learned in this unprecedented effort to prepare policy options for the 1981 farm bill, for improving the administration of continuing USDA programs, for possible tax reform affecting agriculture, and correcting or improving the regulatory process.

That project is well underway and its findings will be ready for consideration by the close of this year.

Regardless of the direction it takes, the structure study may prove as pivotal to the future of the American food and agriculture system as energy policy is to the nation's future and defense policy is to national security.

Thank you.

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